



## The Thin Blue Line Discussion Guide

Director: Errol Morris

Year: 1988

Time: 97 min

### You might know this director from:

The Unknown Known (2013)

Tabloid (2010)

Standard Operating Procedure (2008)

The Fog of War (2003)

A Brief History of Time (1991)

Vernon, Florida (1981)

Gates of Heaven (1978)

## FILM SUMMARY

Errol Morris' chilling film, *THE THIN BLUE LINE*, tells the story of a regular man going about his everyday life when fortune turns against him. Randall Adams, 28, runs out of gas on his way home from work. Walking to the nearest gas station, a stranger stops his car and offers Adams help.

David Harris, 16, is driving a stolen car that contains a pistol and shotgun. The teenager has a long list of convictions and is in the midst of a crime spree. Unaware of this, the hapless Adams spends several hours together with Harris, drinking, smoking marijuana and seeing a drive-in movie.

Later that evening, a patrol car notices that Harris' car doesn't have its lights on. As officer Robert Wood approaches the car, he is shot and killed. The car drives away. It is November 27 and the Dallas police, who have a record of solving crimes quickly, want the case resolved before Christmas.

In a series of interviews with law enforcement officers, witnesses, Adams and Harris, we learn that the innocent man is found guilty and condemned to the electric chair. What's more, it becomes increasingly clear as the film progresses that the evidence stacked against him is questionable. In a stunning accumulation of facts, we are witnesses to the indifference of justice, the nature of truth, and the tragic fate of an innocent person.

## FILM THEMES

Being the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time: this could sum up Randall Adams' erroneous incarceration. But was it a case of justice turning a blind eye? The indifference of fate? Or the indifference we show to others?

### BLIND JUSTICE

Many years after the event, David Harris, who is subsequently found to be guilty of the murder of officer Robert Wood, suggests in the film that justice is blind. The Roman goddess, Lady Justice, is depicted with scales in her right hand and a double-edged sword in her left. She is often represented wearing a blindfold, which symbolizes blind justice: the legal concept of impartiality. However, it is believed that the blindfold originated with the Roman goddess of fortune and fate, Fortuna.

### CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Of the OECD's 34 member states, Japan and the United States are the only countries that have retained capital punishment, and in the U.S., 32 of 50 states continue with the practice. The Biblical maxim, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" is often quoted, but as *THE THIN BLUE LINE* reveals, there is the risk of sending an innocent person to the death. In the case of capital punishment, it is not God or even the law, but fellow human beings, who end a person's life. While most Americans support the death penalty, the strength of that support is declining. Opinions are formed by local/national collective norms, and unless these opinions shift quickly, most leaders will be hesitant to support a repeal.

### DISCRIMINATION

Don Metcalfe, the judge in the case, reportedly told a colleague: "Well, what do you care? He's only a drifter." Adams, the son of a miner, did not have a college education. He was an out-of-towner living in a motel with his brother. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that a line has been drawn between those who have a steady, respectable job and those who do not. Due to his vulnerable status, Adams is subjected to a process of dehumanization by those involved in the case, and one can't help but wonder if his treatment and ensuing conviction would have been different if he'd been more 'successful' in the eyes of justice officials.

### FORTUNE AND FATE

At the end of the film, Errol Morris asks David Harris, who admits to framing Randall Adams, if he considers Adams to be unlucky. "Definitely," replies Harris. Adams was undoubtedly the wrong person turning up in the wrong place at the wrong time. The idea of predestination has existed from the earliest belief systems to New Age philosophies, though many oppose the idea in favor of human capacity and free will. To quote Allen Saunders: "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." But according to Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen."

**“You have a D.A, he doesn’t talk about when they convict you, or how they convict you. He’s talking about how he’s going to kill ya. He don’t give a damn if you’re innocent, he don’t give a damn if you’re guilty. He’s talking... about killing ya.”**

Randall Adams

**“It is better to risk saving a guilty person than to condemn an innocent one.”**

Voltaire

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Errol Morris broke the rules of documentary filmmaking at the time by using dramatized re-enactments. Why do you think he did this? What was the effect for you?
2. How has the documentary changed your understanding of fate?
3. Why have some countries and states put an end to capital punishment? Is there an objective “truth” about the death penalty? If opinions on the matter are formed by local/national collective norms, what is the best way to influence the debate?
4. The film’s musical score was written by one of the world’s most highly acclaimed composers, Philip Glass. In your opinion, what did the music add to the film? What it did detract from?
5. Who did you find yourself “siding” with during the first 30 minutes of the film – David Harris or Randall Adams? How did your view change throughout the film, if at all?
6. What prejudices did the film stir up in you?
7. The film opens with a shot of the monolithic, glass office towers of Dallas, Texas. These images are a repeated theme during the film. What do you think Morris is trying to convey? Did he succeed?
8. What factors might have altered Randall Adams’ fate? For instance, what if he had been a person of color? What if he had been a ‘successful’ white businessman? Discuss how our discriminations might inform our views of justice and the rights to life.
9. Morris’ camera stopped working on the second day of interviewing David Harris, forcing the director to make an audio recording. Did this strengthen or weaken the effect of Harris’ admission? How so?
10. Why is the documentary called THE THIN BLUE LINE?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- On October 25, 1854, during the Crimean war, the only forces that lay between Russian cavalry and a chaotic British camp were the red-coated Sutherland Highlanders 93rd Regiment. Instead of the normal 4-deep defensive line, a 2-deep line was formed. A journalist from The Times wrote that there was nothing but a “thin red streak tipped with a line of steel” between the mounted Russians and the camp. Over time, this mutated into “the thin red line,” which came to symbolize British courage and composure.
- THE THIN BLUE LINE has become an idiomatic expression that refers to the police force in a number of countries. It is understood to symbolize the line that protects law-abiding citizens from those with ill intentions.
- In the U.S., members of the public who wish to show solidarity with police forces display an emblem representing the thin blue line. It is said to encourage favorable treatment from officers.
- Despite having made 2 esteemed documentaries Errol Morris couldn't support himself through filmmaking. He became aware of Randall Morris' story while working as a private investigator.
- Originally, Morris intended to make a documentary about Dr. James Grigson, an expert psychiatrist who had testified in over 100 cases, most of which had resulted in the death penalty.
- Dr. Grigson informed the jury that if Randall Adams was not sentenced to death, he would continue to be a threat to society. It was after meeting Adams that Errol Morris began to question the case made against Adams.
- The investigation carried out by Errol Morris found that five witnesses had committed perjury.
- The film has heavily influenced subsequent documentaries due to its use of crime scene reenactments.
- Promoted as non-fiction, the film was disqualified from being considered for an Academy Award for Best Documentary.
- According to present-day statutes in Texas, people incorrectly convicted should receive USD \$80,000 per year of their incarceration. When Adams' conviction was over-turned, prisoners would receive a lump payment of USD \$25,000 if granted a governor's pardon. Adams' case, however, was dismissed. After 12 years in jail, he left without a single dollar in compensation.
- Research in 2014 has shown that 4.1% of defendants sentenced to death in the U.S. are innocent. During the timeframe of the study, 1972-2004, over 8,000 were put on death row. The new findings suggest that 320 people have been subjected to miscarriages of justice.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share the film. Give others an opportunity to learn about Randall Adams' story and discuss these topics.
2. Speak out if you disagree with capital punishment - join an activist group calling for an end the death penalty or write to your local political representative expressing your opposition.
3. Check out the website of [Amnesty International](#), an organization committed to preventing abuses of human rights. You might become an active member and participate in their actions which include letter-writing campaigns, email petitions and diverse online drives.
4. Give further consideration to any prejudices or discriminations the film revealed in you, and if there's a change of mind or attitude you'd like to pursue.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**